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*Editor's note: This English translation was done by a third party. The original digital story can be accessed [here](#).*

## **A Few Days Ago, Carlos Threw Himself from a Roof in Castellana: He Blamed a Hair-loss Drug**

**Use of the medication has spread among men who want to halt hair loss, but its side effects could exceed those listed in the package leaflet**

**By Alfredo Pascual**

Nacho knew right away that something wasn't right. It was February 4 at 9 a.m. and Carlos, his friend for a decade, seemed more scattered than ever. Upon entering the office, Nacho noticed that Carlos had an open wound on his wrist: the explanation was that he had fallen off his bicycle.

"I was worried and wanted to find out more, because Carlos doesn't have a bike. But the rest of his coworkers started arriving and I didn't want to put him in an uncomfortable situation," Nacho tells this newspaper.

Carlos, 46, has not been the same since last summer. He was a sportsman. He was a nice person. He didn't smoke or use recreational drugs. He enjoyed great success at work, which had earned him a healthy bank account, with which he supported his hobbies.

He liked to go scuba diving on the weekend, and he boasted designer clothing. In recent months, however, he looked like someone else. He didn't want to play sports. He showed up at the office in a dirty shirt. And he was elusive to his companions. He avoided starting conversations. And the few times he did, he was obsessive, always talking about the same subject—the one he broached during his final hour on earth—no matter what his interlocutor answered.

At noon, Nacho went looking for Carlos at his desk, to go to the gym together, as they did every day. He wasn't there.

"I called his mobile phone, and he told me he didn't want to go to the gym. Instead, he had gone up to the roof for some fresh air. There are armchairs and tables up there, where workers can smoke and enjoy views of the area. I didn't pay much attention to it."

Instead, Nacho went to the gym, showered, ate and, when he returned, saw that his friend was not at his desk, so he went up to the roof. There, he found Carlos, but not in the armchair area.

Carlos was at a higher point, where the exterior air conditioning units are anchored. There were no access stairs. Carlos had climbed over the wall.

It was 5 p.m. and the office was starting to empty. On the roof, atop the 12th floor of the Castellana 163 building, in the heart of Madrid's financial district, there was no one left. It was just Nacho and Carlos.

"I asked him to get down, because that place was dangerous, but his head was somewhere else. He started showing me pictures of the two of us, at meals and events last year. I grew nervous because this wasn't a normal reaction. I told him if he didn't get down immediately, I'd call the police. At no time did I think I was going to jump. I just wanted him to react, to end the scene as quickly as possible. He said that was nonsense, that when the police arrived, he'd come down and say he was just getting some fresh air, and I would be his witness."

So Nacho called the police. The moment they hung up the phone, Carlos vanished. Two seconds later, a shocking thud rang out. Nacho dashed down to the building's inner courtyard. When he opened the door, he found his friend's body dead.

When the police and psychologists left, Nacho looked at his cell phone and found a farewell message from Carlos. He had spent the day drafting it and sent it just before tumbling into the great hereafter. He told Nacho he loved him very much, but that he couldn't get out of the black well he had sunk into; that he didn't sleep and couldn't concentrate on anything other than his own personal suffering. He also mentioned a drug that had triggered everything: finasteride.

"I took a hair medication, and it caused me to become depressed. I tried everything to heal but nothing worked. It's called post-finasteride syndrome. Never take this drug. Now I live a constant mental hell," are the exact words he left in his last will.

Carlos had started taking it last summer, when he saw his hair quality deteriorate. "It's true that he was losing hair, but very little, it was hardly noticeable," Nacho says. "He went to a dermatologist with the idea of getting a transplant, but he was prescribed finasteride because his situation was reversible. Shortly after he started taking it, Carlos told me that he wasn't feeling good, that he had erection problems and couldn't concentrate. The doctor asked him to stop taking it. It was at that point that it all got worse."

Carlos struggled with symptoms for seven months. Little by little, he was losing the battle. He stopped diving—his life's passion—and stopped having beers with friends, because the dermatologist recommended no alcohol until he recovered. His companions noticed profound changes in him, such as remembering a girlfriend he had left years ago, of whom he had never before spoken; or that he would stay on the treadmill staring into the void for a long time.

"At the beginning of the year he gave me the keys to his bank, in case anything happened to him. I was scared and asked him to please go to a psychiatrist, but Carlos wasn't up to the task. He was very depressed. Sometimes he'd cry while we were talking, something very rare in him."

What was the purpose of Carlos' suicide? "For him, the fault laid in the pill, as he told different people on several occasions. For those of us who saw him every day, all I can say is that there was a definitive change in him when he started taking the drug. If isn't to blame for everything, it was at least the trigger," Nacho lamented.

### Carlos is not alone

Failing to find answers in the medical literature, Carlos looked for his symptoms online and turned up information on the [Platform of those Affected by Finestéride](#).

"Unfortunately, he didn't manage to contact us. We would've tried to help him. At least he would've known he wasn't alone, that there are many of us in the same situation," said the site's manager, Carlos Rerucha. The 31-year-old Madrileño, who works in marketing, is also a victim of the drug.

Rerucha began taking finasteride in February 2021. During the first month, he noticed a severe drop in his libido, which recovered shortly after. The real problems started a year and a half after he first took the medicine, when he began suffering from insomnia, mental fog, and erection problems. One night, at a nightclub, he said: "I met a girl and we hit it off. We were kissing but my body wasn't reacting. I didn't have any pleasure, any erection or excitement of any kind. It was as if I'd been castrated. The next day, I went to the dermatologist to quit the pills," he explained.

Like Carlos, Rerucha was aggravated by the symptoms that set in post-therapy.

"All of a sudden, I stopped being able to sleep. I did it, at most, for an hour, from which I woke up with tachycardias and anxiety. I was unable to concentrate and feel joy or pleasure and I often lost my voice. When I spoke for more than 20 minutes in a row, I spent the next five days not being able to talk," said the affected man. "I didn't recover. Even my penis changed shape. It was reformed in a way such that the flow of blood to it is much less than usual.

"At one point, the idea of suicide began to pass me through my head. It was a thought that, upon arriving, was impossible to forget. I was twice admitted to a psychiatric facility, in March and September 2023, to stabilize me. I couldn't understand why I felt so bad physically at just 30," Rerucha recalled.

Iñaki, 26, took the drug for just three months, in 2022. Since then, he has not been able to have sex with his partner, but would be willing to give it up for good if it meant getting rid of other side effects.

"Mental fog has taken hold of me in recent years. Also anhedonia, cognitive problems and chronic fatigue, which have made it unable to me to work for more than a year," he told this

newspaper. “The worst symptoms are the mental ones. It’s exhausting living with the cognitive problems I suffer.”

The young man, however, hasn’t lost hope of a full recovery. “It’s crazy that all this is going on inside me after taking that poison for just three months, but I know that one day everything will be fine, that justice will be done and that studies will be published confirming we’re not crazy,” he continued. “Mom, dad, I promise to be me again someday.”

### A cosmetic drug

Mature men love to talk about hair. There are thousands of internet forums where not only reviews of the best clinics for getting an implant are published, but also specialist diagnoses are posted, or hair growth is followed through endless photos of their heads under a lamp.

Of course, outsiders also share their experiences with drugs. For more than a decade, there has been a common consensus: for light alopecia, minoxidil, whether topical or oral, and finasteride (or duasteride), for more tricky cases. Those are the only two drugs that work amidst a sea of tonic sellers. In reality, capillary stimulation is a side effect, and caused by medicines that were popularized for other uses: lowering tension, in the case of Minoxidil, and treating enlarged prostates, in the case of finasteride. In those cases, doctors discovered a collateral improvement: the slowing, or complete halting, of hair loss in their patients.

Throughout the 1990s, but especially during the subsequent decade, finasteride has been growing in popularity among dermatologists, to the point where, today, Propecia—finasteride’s brand name in Spain—is among our nation’s most prescribed medicines. The treatment costs around 50 euros per month, and Social Security only covers it in cases where it was prescribed by a urologist. Thus, this molecule alone generates \$130 million annually. And according to estimates, that market will double in size by 2032.

Finasteride inhibits the production of the enzyme 5-alpha reductase, which transforms testosterone into dihydrotestosterone, which in turn is responsible for diminishing hair follicles in people with a genetic predisposition for such. Like any medicine, and especially those affecting the hormonal balance, [finasteride carries a number of contraindications](#), most of which have been reported in the cases of those affected. Sexual problems and depression are listed as rare symptoms. Other symptoms, meanwhile, such as tachycardia, liver failure and suicidal ideation, are recognized as well, although without any incidence rates attached.

This wasn’t always the case. Merck, the pharmaceutical company that brought Propecia to market, resisted including a warning about depression in its packaging until the US Food and Drug Administration forced it to do so in 2010. Later, in 2022, the agency also had to force them to recognize that some patients experience suicidal impulses after taking finasteride.

### Post-treatment syndrome

The main demand of those affected is that the risk list be further expanded. Their campaign calls, on one hand, for progress in research to determine how many patients suffer from the most serious symptoms and, on the other hand, confirming the existence of post-finasteride syndrome (PFS), which refers to the persistent symptoms they suffer once they quit the drug. From a medial point of view, the syndrome is not validated in the scientific literature, but several studies suggest its existence.

“Dermatologists only warn of low libido in the consultation. No one was warned that, in specific cases, you can end up depressed with suicidal thoughts—or worse, as happened to Carlos,” said Rerucha. “It’s a desperate situation. We go to the doctor with the persistent symptoms and they tell us that it’s all in our head, that we need to relax, that it’s just the [nocebo effect](#).”

“Does PFS exist? I’ll give that question back to you: Does long Covid exist? It exists to the extent that there are patients who say they suffer from it, and I’m sure they’re not lying. Another thing is the cause of these symptoms,” said [Dr. Pedro Rodriguez](#), deputy head of the Dermatology Service at Ruber International. “Of course there are specific cases, but doctors have to rely on scientific literature, which tells us that most of these cases fall under to the nocebo effect.”

Rodriguez, who considers the medicine safe to the point where he admits to taking it himself, points out that specific cases should be considered as exceptions: “I always cite the example of paracetamol. This drug is primarily responsible for liver transplants due to acute failure, but that doesn’t mean it’s an unsafe medication. The proof is that a lot of people take it and nothing happens to them. Medicines feel different from one person than another and, unfortunately, we have not yet developed personalized medicine to the point that the genetic profiles of each patient are known.”

In forums, it is common to meet people who buy finasteride without going through the doctor, or who take higher doses of the prescription in the hope of recovering their hair. In this regard, Ruber’s dermatologist stresses the importance of respecting doses: “For prostate treatment, a dose of finasteride is used that does produce some of these unwanted effects, but for alopecia the recommended dose is five times lower. It is important for patients to respect the dose and, above all, not to start dosing without a physician’s prescription.”

[Dr. Claudia Larrarte](#), medical director of the Capilar Velázquez Clinic, acknowledges that patients may experience “decrease in libido, erection difficulties and, in some cases, alterations in the hair texture,” in addition to other less common effects such as “increase in male breast tissue and certain allergic reactions, such as skin rashes.” Still, it’s important that the doctor “monitor and properly manage these side effects.”

Doctors have their work cut out for them vis-à-vis such monitoring of finasteride therapy, which has boomed over the past five years, has waiting lists of up to a year, and does not always have the resources to monitor the progress of its patients.

The answer as to whether PFS exists will only arrive in the future. What we know thus far is that, since 2016, more than 1,500 Americans have sued Merck for prolonged damages to their sexual health. The pharmaceutical company has spent more than \$5 million on out-of-court settlements. This newspaper has contacted Normon and Cinfa, the laboratories that market hair finasteride in Spain, to talk about the safety of the drug, but no one responded.

Organon, hours after the publication of this report, sent a statement to this newspaper:

“The available evidence, over years of experience with finasteride in clinical practice, supports the safety of this medicine. Regulators around the world carefully reviewed the safety data for these drugs before approval and, together with our company (Organon), have continued to review additional safety data continuously all these years, as part of our routine post-marketing surveillance process of any pharmaceutical product. At no time has a causal relationship been established between the use of finasteride and suicidal ideation. Nothing is more important for Organon than the safety of our medications and patients. We at Organon always advise patients to consult their health professionals regarding any doubts they may have about their treatments. We also offer different contact pathways, which allow us to remain close to patients and ensure their health.

For its part, the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the community medicines regulator, [five months ago opened an investigation into finasteride](#). Its aim is to assess the extent to which suicidal ideation is common during alopecia treatment. That research was prompted by France’s drug-regulatory authority, which has [recorded several cases of patients with persistent symptoms after quitting treatment](#). In France, an email has even been sent to all doctors who prescribe finasteride, and to pharmacists, warning them to pay maximum attention to finasteride patients who experience sexual and/or psychiatric problems. If the EMA meets the timeline it set, by the end of May it will issue a recommendation to the European Commission on the safety of the drug. Until that happens, alopecia patients will have to keep wondering whether keeping their hair is worth the risk of severe depression.